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Meet the Press

NBC Network

November 30, 1986 11:30 a.m.

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MARVIN KALB: The Iran scandal continues.

Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, now barred from the White House, is reported to have shredded secret documents. Admiral John Poindexter, the National Security Advisor who resigned, is also reported to have shredded documents, but whether these documents are relevant to the Justice Department investigation, headed by Attorney General Edwin Meese, is not known at this time.

On Capitol Hill, other investigations have been launched, questions raised about who knew what, when; all as the President's closest advisors, including Chief of Staff Donald Regan, deny knowledge of the roots of the spreading scandal, how millions of dollars from secret U.S. arms sales to Iran ended up bankrolling the Contra guerrillas fighting the Sandanista regime in Nicaragua, a tangled, murky and possibly illegal operation.

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That's our focus today with our guests Walter Mondale, the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1984, a former Senator from Minnesota and then Vice President during the Carter Administration; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democratic Senator from New York, a new member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Richard Lugar, Republican Senator from Indiana, the outgoing Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

We'll get their views on Meet the Press, Sunday, November 30th, 1986.

(Commercial)

Hello and welcome once again. I'm Marvin Kalb.

President Reagan's best friends advise him to move quickly, to shake up the White House staff, to fire Donald Regan and to change the national agenda if possible.

The President returns to Washington today from a long Thanksgiving Day weekend in California to face a series of investigations into the biggest political scandal of his Presidency, the biggest since Watergate.

Joining me for our interviews are my colleagues, Andrea Mitchell, White House Correspondent for NBC News and Albert Hunt, the Washington Bureau Chief of the Wall Street Journal.

We'll be back with former Vice President Walter Mondale when Meet the Press returns right after these messages.

(Commercial)

MR. KALB: We are back on Meet the Press discussing the Iran/Contra connection and the scandal therefrom, with former Vice President Walter Mondale who comes to us from Boston.

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Mr. Mondale, you were quoted a few days ago as saying, and I'm quoting, "I know the White House and I can tell you there is not the slightest chance that this was carried out by one or two people without approval."

Okay. Who do you think was giving Lieutenant Colonel North the approval?

MR. WALTER MONDALE: Well, I have no way of knowing but what I was saying in that comment is having worked there for four years, the idea that an officer on assignment in the military would undertake by himself a massive program with all of the explosive policy and legal connotations of this action by himself, without having political approval from higher authority, is just a non-starter. It just seems absolutely impossible, in my opinion.

But who he talked to, who he might have gotten clearance from, how high it goes, I don't know. That's why we need a full disclosure and as quickly as possible.

MR. KALB: Mr. Hunt?

MR. ALBERT HUNT: Mr. Mondale, this Administration has made much of the role that Vice President Bush has played, particularly in the area of foreign policy. Say, in large part, they patterned it after the role that you used to play in the Carter Administration.

Based on your knowledge then of the way foreign policy works in these sorts of administrations, do you think that Vice President Bush either was or should have been aware of what was going on as far as the Iran/Contra connection?

MR. MONDALE: Well, I don't know how to answer that. I know that when I was in the White House, I was privy to every bit of secret information that the President knew, every bit of it. Whether that's the case now, whether Vice President Bush knew about this, I don't know.

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But let me change the scene just a moment. You know, the whole nation is discussing who knew what, when and so on.

If you look at our Constitution, we weren't supposed to go through this hide and seek game, this guess what game. The Constitution says that the President must take care to faithfully execute the laws of the land. In other words, it's his responsibility to know what's going on, to run that Administration and to make certain that it obeys the law. Whether that occurred, I don't know and what Vice President Bush's role was, I don't know.

MR. HUNT: Well, if you don't know, the key is to find out what did happen, as you just suggested. What should be done now? Should there be a special prosecutor appointed?

MR. MONDALE: Well, the first thing is that the President should stand up, give a speech and lay it all out. He can find out, if he doesn't know, within hours exactly what happened and clean this up.

MR. HUNT: Is that sufficient then?

MR. MONDALE: What?

MR. HUNT: Is that sufficient? We don't need a special prosecutor, we don't need an Ervin type committee on Capitol Hill?

MR. MONDALE: No, I would start though -- I think what we're trying to do is to save the last two years of the Presidency.

If it is felt that he has failed to level with the American people, I don't see how he can govern and I don't see how we can deal with America's real problems, at home or abroad, and it makes the world much more dangerous for us.

In addition to that, in addition to the President's responsibilities, I have proposed the establishment of

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a committee in the Senate similar to the Sam Ervin committee, but this time chaired perhaps by Sam Nunn of Georgia with, say, Bob Dole as the ranking member on the Republican side, to try to take a balanced, bipartisan, thorough approach to find out exactly what happened.

Secondly, it's perfectly obvious that we need a special prosecutor. This idea of self-investigation is a non-starter, particularly by Mr. Meese. We need a prosecutor who can look into all aspects of it, use the FBI and find out what happened, if laws were violated, as they apparently were, and then what legal steps should follow.

The present situation has deepened public unrest because there's stories about shredding of crucial documents, about letting these offices remain open to the very people who are suspected of committing crimes. This is not way to restore public confidence.

MS. ANDREA MITCHELL: Mr. Vice President, let me ask you about the role of Mr. Meese.

When he came out and announced all this, the Attorney General who was investigating it said that the top aides should stand shoulder to shoulder with the President. Wasn't he, in fact, acquitting Mr. Regan, Mr. Casey, Mr. Bush, the President himself without having even investigated it?

MR. MONDALE: Somebody asked him, and I believe it was Andrea Mitchell, "How do you investigate yourself?" The answer is they can't. His answer was, "Well, we're not investigating ourselves, we're investigating those who were named." Well, that implied that that was the end of it.

Nobody believes that. There's no public confidence in this process. There simply must be an independent special counsel and prosecutor as provided by the law.

MS. MITCHELL: Well, do you think that the integrity of the investigation has already been destroyed by the

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fact that files were probably destroyed, that papers were shredded and that people, key players, were not properly interviewed early on?

MR. MONDALE: I believe that there's several things that are troubling. One is that these charged or suspected officers were permitted access to those documents. Any prosecutor knows that those documents should have been sealed immediately so that they were for the use of the Courts and the Congress only.

Secondly, the FBI was not ordered into this case right away. When you have a serious case, that's the first thing you do at the federal level, so that these skilled, able investigators can get on the assignment. Anybody who's been around these matters knows that you could lose crucial evidence.

Now, whether this has actually happened, I don't know. There's no way of knowing, but it doesn't look good at all to me.

MR. KALB: Mr. Mondale, you and a number of other Democrat leaders have been saying in effect that you don't want to see a weakened American Presidency because that's dangerous for the world. But isn't that just a bit disingenuous?

Wouldn't the Democrats really like to see Ronald Reagan weakened so that the Democrats have a better shot at it in 1988?

MR. MONDALE: Look, if the Democrats look like they're trying to hurt America to help themselves, they're not going to get elected to anything and they shouldn't. This is a problem for all of us now. And fundamentally, it's the most serious of all problems because it goes to the issue of the accountability of high public officers to the law of the land. It really goes to the question of liberty.

I'm a good Democrat, but I'll tell you first of all, I want this issue of the accountability of the law settled and I want those who are responsible to tell

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us what happened and only when they do that can we protect ourselves.

MR. HUNT: Mr. Mondale, when the Iranian regime played a role in bringing down your Administration, Ronald Reagan and others were quite harsh in the way you all handled it. Now, ironically, it seems to be threatening their Administration.

What lessons do you think we can draw from their conduct to foreign policy here?

MR. MONDALE: I think they have had six years of very dismal performance. There has been an erratic, ill-focused foreign policy. Now, six years into their Administration, they have accomplished nothing, no major foreign policy accomplishment, which is the good news.

Right now, we're dead in the water in the Middle East. In Central America, they've just reached the SALT II accords and we're further away, apparently, from an arms agreement and instead are in the middle of an arms race instead.

The credibility of the Administration with our allies, we told them not to sell arms to Iran while we were doing it. We've been trying to get, we were told, a tough policy to fight with terrorists and yet we've been trafficking with them. It's hard to know how foreign policy could be in greater disarray than it is today.

MR. KALB: Mr. Mondale, thank you very much for being our guest.

In a moment, the view of two members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Republican Richard Lugar when Meet the Press returns right after these messages.

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MR. KALB: We are back on Meet the Press discussing the Iran/Contra connection with two members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Republican Richard Lugar.

Gentlemen, we know that the President is coming back to Washington today. He has obviously been discussing this out in California. The scandal spreads. What do you think is the first, most important thing that he should do when he gets back?

Senator Moynihan?

SENATOR DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN: First, he should indicate that there is an extraordinary problem and that he is going to deal with it in the ways we have for extraordinary problems. He will see that a special prosecutor is appointed. I would like to see him ask the Senate to appoint, in effect, a Watergate committee.

He's got a bunch of people around him who, as one editorial said this morning, the only thing they seemed to have learned from Watergate is to burn the tapes. Now, that can't go on. That will just --

MR. KALB: And to do this when?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Do, if this afternoon, midnight or 6:00 o'clock in the morning, immediately take charge, be President and get together with the other elected people in this city and govern.

MR. KALB: Senator Lugar?

SENATOR RICHARD LUGAR: Well, I agree. I think you must take charge immediately in the ways that have been suggested. I think that he needs a new staff at the White House. He may need new Cabinet members. He clearly needs a new National Security Council and he ought to do that right away and allow everybody who's investigating and worry about who did what and what have you to move along on that path and find justice.

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But the country's got to be governed in the meanwhile and we have serious foreign policy problems that have been undermined in Central American, the Middle East, terrorism across the board.

We're in danger from the Soviets when they see this vulnerability. That's why the interests of the Presidency are for the President to be President, to clean house of all the malefactors and to move on.

MR. KALB: Senator, do you know whether the President is going to appoint a special prosecutor, immediately soon today?

SENATOR LUGAR: No, I have no idea, but I think the value of this program and others is to encourage this strongly. There's been debate for days out there, at the White House.

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Anybody out there listening, watching?

SENATOR LUGAR: Well, this is inconceivable. It's been characterized as a generation gap between the old men who are all defending each other and the young boys who want to get on with it. I'm saying I'm with the young in this case. We'd better get on with it.

MS. MITCHELL: Senator Lugar, just to follow up and take it one step at a time: you said a new staff, perhaps a new Cabinet. Donald Regan, Chief of Staff, the most powerful since Sherman Adams, he would tell you himself, up until two weeks ago. Now he's saying he didn't know anything. Does the bank president know if the teller is fiddling with the books. Should Regan be out?

SENATOR LUGAR: Well, clearly, whether Don Regan knew about the bank teller or any of this I think is beside the point. The President needs a first class, big league staff.

MS. MITCHELL: Starting with the Chief of Staff?

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SENATOR LUGAR: He needs big leaguers. Yes. There are great people in this country that could serve this President right now. They are not on that staff and they need to be.

MS. MITCHELL: What about Casey, what about Shultz, what about Weinberger?

SENATOR LUGAR: I won't get into each and every Cabinet member. I wouldn't rule out replacing any of them.

In other words, it just seems to me, at this point, the President has to have a true, new beginning, a new Administration. Literally every policy is in shambles around and he will need to take charge in a way that Mrs. Aquino did last week. She said, "Everybody is out." Now, we might replace a few.

MS. MITCHELL: Is it also clear to you that George Bush, who we are told sees every piece of paper that goes to the President and sits in on every intelligence briefing each morning, that he had to know or in any case should have known?

SENATOR LUGAR: I don't know. I presume he should have known.

I don't know whether he did know, but the facts are that George Bush has carefully always kept his confidence with the President. It seems to me that he ought to on this occasion, he ought to be supportive. He's a part of this Administration. He ought to be a part of the reorganization of it.

MR. HUNT: Senator Moynihan, you were a long-time member of the Senate Intelligence Committee and therefore have intimate knowledge of the way the CIA functions. Is it conceivable to you that this operation could have taken place, the funneling of money to the Contras, without Director William Casey knowing about it?

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SENATOR MOYNIHAN: It is conceivable that a rogue National Security Council staff, avoiding the law, found itself in cahoots with agents inside the Agency who helped avoid the law.

The law has been broken by people with no sense of their Constitutional responsibility here. We are going to find that these intrigues are everywhere. You could see it coming as they began that secret move to overthrow the Nicaraguans without ever telling themselves even fully what they were doing.

MR. HUNT: Sir, do you think that Mr. Casey knew?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: He ought to have known but it could have been kept from him.

I'm afraid we're going to have a couple of months of this kind of question. Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Mr. Secretary, what didn't you know and when didn't you know it?

MR. HUNT: Do you think Mr. Casey -- do you think it would be in the best interest of the Reagan Administration if Mr. Casey were to either step down or be dismissed?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Mr. Casey has to find out who in his organization was working with North and Poindexter and the others and get rid of them immediately. He ought to ask also why it was John McMahon, the man who had agreed to the first shipment to Iran through the CIA airline --

MS. MITCHELL: You mean the former deputy?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Yes, the number two man, when Casey was in China.

MR. KALB: Without Casey's knowledge of that, do you think?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Without his knowledge.

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But he said, "I'll do it once but the next time this has to come from the President in writing." John McMahon did exactly the right thing and the next thing you know he's out. Why?

MR. KALB: Did he inform anybody of that when he did it?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Yes, sir. He passed word back to the White House, "I'll do it this one time, but next time I need an order."

MR. KALB: Did he tell anybody on the Hill that he did that?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Not that I know of.

MR. KALB: Well, now, is that consistent with the law that he'd take an action like that without informing the committees?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Once the President approves, the committee had to be informed and it should have been informed even if the President didn't specifically approve. That's the issue.

MR. KALB: Senator Lugar, do you know whether the committee was, in fact, informed last November that this action was being taken?

SENATOR LUGAR: No, at least the Foreign Relations Committee was not informed. I don't know about the Intelligence Committee and we had not liaison information that would give us that thought. I think we're once again back into this problem of what the President's requirement is, how timely this information must be.

When I was briefed by Admiral Poindexter and he said "timely" could cover ten months or 18 or what have you, there was a third option as opposed to telling the leadership, telling the two committees. The third option, I presume, was at any point that it became convenient.

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SENATOR MOYNIHAN: That directly violates the spirit of the law and they knew it.

MR. HUNT: Let me ask you what I think may be the bottom line question here.

If we were to find out that President Reagan and Vice President Bush knew about some of this, what are you all prepared to do or what would the Congress be prepared to do? What are the ultimate consequences?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: What you do is, if the President would come out and say it quickly and clearly and cleanly and get rid of all the people involved him in such matters and say, "Well, Mr. President, a mistake was made. It won't be made again." Right, fine. All right, let's go on now. Let's keep that going forward.

MR. HUNT: Senator Lugar, could you tell me what you think we're prepared to do if we find that out?

SENATOR LUGAR: Well, I think we're prepared to indicate that there have got to be checks and balances.

But I think that Senator Moynihan is correct. The President ultimately will need to testify on what his policies were. He has great latitude in foreign policy. When we get into the murky business, whether law was broken or what have you, probably not, but the facts are that mistakes were made.

Even if the President felt he was furthering his policy for terrorism, the hostages, the Middle East or Nicaragua, he was in error. These didn't work.

MR. KALB: I'm a little confused here. You're saying that no law was broken, Senator Lugar. You're saying, Senator Moynihan, if I read you right, that a law was broken.

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Clearly, laws have been broken. Laws have been shredded.

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MR. KALB: You two both know the law. How can you disagree on something like that?

SENATOR LUGAR: Well, I don't think we know the facts altogether. In other words, the shredding business that has been very prominent could very well have been routine shredding. If it is shredding of things that were evidence, that's something else. We don't know that as yet.

The President's asserting this power to inform the Congress down the trail. I think Pat and I both feel this is stretching the law, maybe almost out of shape but that's his assertion at this point. It clearly breaks the spirit of it.

What the President must know now, particularly with Democratic control of both Houses of Congress, that there is going to have to be a commonty and a sharing of these operations that this type of activity does not denote.

MS. MITCHELL: Senator Moynihan, to follow up on what Al was saying, what are the consequences if they don't do something quickly, if they don't come clean and satisfy the committees and perhaps an independent counsel that they are willing to tell all?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: A protracted paralysis, rancor plays in the air, failure for what really was going to be a pretty good Presidency in the sense that people felt good about it. We don't want that to happen and you don't, Dick. It needn't, it needn't. He's got about 48 hours.

Does someone out there or on the plane know? 48 hours or it will be lost.

MR. KALB: Why 48?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: Because as of yesterday noon, they actually thought that this would go away or hadn't

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happened. They've got to make clear that it won't go away unless they see that it has happened.

MR. HUNT: Senator Lugar, you talk about bringing in wise people to run this White House. Can you give us some idea of who you'd like to see as National Security Advisor or as Chief of Staff?

SENATOR LUGAR: Let me give you some examples. I don't know whether they're available. I'd like to see Brzezinski, Kissinger, Jean Kirkpatrick, Bobby Ray Inman, Howard Baker. These people all come to mind. I don't know whether they're available and where they fit, but these are examples of big leaguers, I believe, who know something about foreign policy, strategic policy, the sorts of advice the President ought to get.

MS. MITCHELL: We've been told, however, that the process is that each Cabinet member is fighting for someone mediocre, for someone who will not challenge these vested interests.

SENATOR LUGAR: Precisely, and that's the reason anybody who is exercising these vetoes ought to be out of it.

This is not a time for reducing down to the lowest common denominator to save everybody who's now exercising veto. That's precisely the problem.

MS. MITCHELL: Let me get back, for a moment, to the question of the way this White House works. You know it intimately.

You know Admiral Poindexter as a military man who takes orders and does not fashion policy. Is it conceivable to you that he developed this whole thing on his own?

SENATOR LUGAR: I think it's conceivable and the fact is that I believe that those people in the Security Council thought they knew the general thrust of what the President wanted. They knew they had some

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latitude to develop what they wanted to do and they used it to the Nth degree.

MS. MITCHELL: Well, both of you gentlemen, what does that tell you about the Presidency of Ronald Reagan?

SENATOR MOYNIHAN: It has not been functioning. It is, as William F. Buckley said, the last year has been an absence of law, an absence of order and failure as Dick Lugar has said.

MS. MITCHELL: And the man Ronald Reagan, the kind of man who we know is very good at making people feel good, very good at the public relations aspects? Donald Regan described himself as the shovel brigade, following up Main Street up the parade.

SENATOR LUGAR: Well, the problem is that it's not just that. He was involved in the policies that were being shoveled out. The President has set some good guidelines. He needs a mighty good staff, however, to give him the information and the implementation.

MR. KALB: Senators, both of you, thank you very much for being our guests today and discussing, among other things, at least as I see it, how very fragile even the most popular president can be once his competency and credibility are brought into question.

That's it for now. Thank you all for joining us and we'll see you next Sunday.

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